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ABSTRACT

When assembling or evaluating experimental programs in college English, the crucial fact to be remembered is that the success of the undertaking depends more on the teachers than on the program itself, for it is men, not programs, who fail in the constant experiment with books. Teachers need to be adventurous, constantly rereading, rethinking, and experimenting with literary works. They should maintain a balance and simplicity that meets their pedagogical responsibilities of liberating minds and not allow or encourage students to egotistically ignore works which strike them as "irrelevant." Above all, teachers must encourage their students to uncover the questions inherent in literature, to raise their own questions (particularly through writing), and to lead a self-examined life. (MF)

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Experimental Programs and Programmatic Experiments

The title of my little talk may be annoying. At least it has been to me, since submitting it over five months ago and having had to live with it, and to write to it. I am more used to dreaming up titles after the fact, or to finding them in the text ready made. But I wanted something that would turn the subject, Experimental Programs in College English, upon itself; a title that would force the question, What do I mean by "experimental" and what by "program"? And, of course, what I do not mean. We all hear a great deal of the word "experiment," and we sometimes bag our mixed feelings about what's hot and new with "experimental." "Program" is broadly used, often glibly; "programmatic" is the word in my title turned sour. There is one other word, "and," a word with perhaps more potential than any other in the language: I shall try it again, shortly.

There is a bigger question. What happens when the two words get together? Does one say, "experimental program," or "experimental program," or "ex-per-i-men-tal pro-gram"? Or are all three possible? and one may place the stress where and when one feels like it. I am reminded of two other words, each really a noun phrase--"weekend" and "Strangelove." (A great deal may be said to happen when they get together.) Why don't we also say, "Dr. Strange-

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love"; and, along with the British, why don't we remember Monday's blahs and temper Friday's hopes with an occasional "week-end"? It is that sort of sober "end" I wish to stress: the difference between an English program borne of the wisdom of constant human experiment with books--and--an experiment with English, whether gay or somber, based on pseudo-rational notions about men and books, about teachers and students, and uniquely programmed to prove its own worth.

In a very real sense all life is experimental, and every given life an experiment. I am older today than I was yesterday. However severe or slack my habits, tomorrow will be not quite today. In a year, a day, an hour, this little experiment of mine may be over. So, literature. No one book is quite like another. No two books by one man are quite the same. A man's last book may be sillier than his first; his unwritten book of life may be wiser than his published works. All this is to say, books and men are experiments, and if we are to live and read, to think and talk, to write, to know, to love, to ask, to die--How awfully simple those words sound!--we are bound to do so experimentally.

But a bridge is needed between books and men, between what has been said and what can or won't be lived with, for most men have neither the will nor the way to adequate self-understanding. Schools are established, and English departments within schools, to help growing men bring books to the test of life--i.e., to become thinking men. Some men also live to try the other half of Dr. Johnson's injunction:

to bring life to the test of books. And a few, whose livelihood is books, spend most of their lives bringing books to the test of books. They are teachers, professors of English, men who have learned some books through other men, who have taught themselves some books, and who like all men are bound by the limits of individual ability, knowledge, and experience--bound, finally, to the human experiment.

Now if we are all bound to experiment, and if most of us require some schooling in the understanding of the words other men have tried and of our own attempts to live and learn, we are bound also to be unhappy. For unless we are blindly faithful to a religious or political promise of the blest, or to one great embracing book, we find ourselves unable to know enough of who we are and of what we read and hear about--and dissatisfied with what little we can control. Moreover, we see around us men who with little knowledge, we suspect, can do more than we--or who manage to do more, or get away with more--and our life is made even more insecure when we find that professors whose authority we have never questioned, who teach books the truth of which we have never doubted, have also a capacity for the incapable: suffer occasional paralysis of will; are sometimes made cowards to conscience; are, again, bound to humanity. That great epigraph to the Eton College ode, that Gray snatched from Menander: "I am a man--sufficient reason for being miserable."

So we invent an English program: for the moment I mean a regular sequence of English courses: a pattern of learning and instruction which tries to secure to many minds and hearts . . a variety of books that no one man can really bring to the test. And we invite trouble. Patterns are not easily lived by. Man is a creature but capable of reason, not a nobly rational animal. The emerging pattern of life in a student and the pattern cut of a teacher seem trouble enough: "Christ! what are patterns for?" Learning is hard, and teaching too, and although variety is said to be the spice of life, not all teachers and students take to the smoked fish sort of book, or to the molasses sort, or to the garlic bread, sage dressing, sauce Robert, Indian curry sorts. And no one, be he weight-watcher or gourmand, cares to mix all condiment.

To make more trouble: an English program once defined is hard to change. Some men begin to mistake themselves for the program, the program for themselves, and, when the irrepressible New erupts, there seems to be no room in the In-group, in the canon of writers and works, scholars and critics; no place in the aging definition of Program for something fresh or unknown, something arch or disturbing, even something mysterious. And some men then begin to speak of Tradition as if it really existed, independent of themselves; as if the dirty rag and bone shop of life had nothing to do with Works of Art. Some men, I say. Some men.

If my neo-Augustan musings have some immediate point, it is simply that men--not books--cease to live, to experiment; that men--not programs--fail in the constant experiment with books. And it is foolish to believe that an act of will can program such experiment, that an experiment rationally programmed can restore humanity.

"But we have to," some say, "for the traditional English program isn't working: it's out of step with the times. Students don't read, or if they do they read only what they want to read, what's relevant to them. They hate surveys, they can't stand lecture courses, they'll talk but can't write--unless grades depend on it, and grades can't be depended on. Young instructors don't read, or if they do they read only what they have to read, what's relevant to them. They hate teaching surveys, they can't stand lecturing, they'll teach but not write--unless promotion depends on it, and <u>that</u> can't be depended on." I've generalized the argument and made fun of it. But the notion of rats deserting a sinking ship is widely held and often heard. And it serves nicely as rationale for all kinds of experimentation. That is, for trapping the rats as they hit the deck and for watching them perform ratwise in (quote) a totally new environment (unquote).

Years ago, in Boston, a man sold many boxes to credulous immigrants. When one put a piece of paper in the box and turned the crank, a genuine new dollar bill came out. I

needn't mention the difference between the cost of the box and the number of bills already in it. So, computers. There may be a sort of poetry in punched cards, but it's what's fed into the machine that matters; and nowhere in the educational system, it seems to me, is the vanity of human wishes more extreme than in programming--in the so-called rationale behind much social experiment--and particularly in the reading of students' minds: what they are supposed to want; what they can or will do. Students are becoming so thoroughly "understood," and are so thoroughly conforming to their own understoodness--some students--it follows that the only thing to do is to acknowledge their state of being and to "input" them into an experiment of bringing life to the test of life. The rats again.

I've so capitalized on Dr. Johnson's wisdom, I had better balance the argument with some gold he distinctly disliked--Lycidas. Not long ago I listened to a professor of English complain that Lycidas is irrelevant to students today. That all Milton is, for that matter. That this particular Cambridge monody of feigned grief over the death of a fellow student is, with all its pastoral conventions and Christian references, useless. (This particular teacher was working out a new program in college English--I mean, he was programming an experiment--and part of his rationale was the programmatic denial of all such learned literature.) I wonder. I wonder how Lycidas had been taught in his class.

I worry less about whether it is taught at all, for I have no fear of a Lycidas lost to posterity. Neither had Milton.

But as to what this professor had to say about the relevance of the poem to his students--and to his colleagues' students, and to future students programmed into his experiment--I'll have to be nasty, brutish, and short, and beg the question: "So, Lycidas is not relevant to you. How relevant are you to it?" If students consider themselves, or if we consider students, relevant to literature only as they happen to exist, or coexist, they oughtn't to be considered students--of literature or of life. It's all a sort of inverted Cartesianism: Sum. Ergo cogito. But I insist that this is not really the way students feel: it is the way some students have been taught to feel, allowed to feel, engineered to feel. And it leads, finally, to a way how not to feel, to the avenue of the inhuman, or anti-human. It is our vanity--I mean, literally, our giddy empty-headedness--that is partly responsible for such selfishness of mind, such parchness of hand, such coldness of heart.

Part of the greatness of Lycidas lies in its power--continual power, if only we will read it--to raise great questions. What, after all, is the meaning of life? What is fame--"That last infirmity of noble mind"? What are ability, goodness, and the promise of human endeavor worth? What is immortal? I submit that too few students are hearing these questions raised; too few are having occasion to ask them of themselves. Great but simple ideas, penetrating truths such as these, are not "naturally" known to any one.

They have to be come upon, to be pointed out; they have to be lived and experimented with. And they cannot finally be answered. I suggest that not enough of today's college English is devoted to raising such questions as these--these cannot be put down as "strictly academic questions": they are mature questions that thinking men have always had to know and gauge--and that too much teaching is given to lowering answers. Answers to questions of history and biography, of psychology and pathology, of real and imagined critical wars. Questionable answers--which are rarely worth remembering. T. S. Eliot once said of In Memoriam, another great questioning poem in the pastoral tradition, that its quality of doubt made it memorable--not its quality of faith.

What are some memorable qualities of a college English program--qualities of men bound by books to humanity?

First, constancy. A constant experiment with books. But a humane constancy. No teacher should be compelled to teach a particular work or course every year. If a teacher feels personally compelled to do so--for his own sake, for his students' sake, for the sake of his author or subject field--so be it! But not for the sake of a catalogue or an imposed sequence.

But if constancy is to be the teacher's trust, students are owed more than the constant trappings of outward show or one professor's magnificent obsession. Constant experiment.

A rereading of the work every year it is taught. A reshuffling of the bibliographical and critical pack. A reordering of the syllabus. And--most important--an attempt to teach the work as if it were being taught for the first time. Students, after all, are reading and studying the work for the first time. This is what I mean by "experimental": the adventurously human.

Third, balance--and symmetry. Some poems can be used for the purpose of demonstrating the difference between the structural principle of syntax and the logic of metaphor. Some, to show certain patterns of imagery. Some poems, for the qualities of an age's sensibility. Some, for a poet's prejudices. Some, as examples of bad poems. But a survey of English literature, Beowulf to Virginia Woolf, is not a course in structural principles of syntax, in patterns of imagery, in prejudices, or in historically arrived at sensibilities. Balance, for such a big adventure--and the symmetry that a teacher who is constant in his experiment can achieve, and help his students perceive.

Fourth, pedagogical responsibility. My, that's a mouthful! If a professor is constant, if he is balanced in point of view and presentation, hasn't he "got" pedagogical responsibility? Perhaps. But he needs ever to remind himself that he knows more, has read more, and lives surer of the worth of books and closer to the end of life's experiment than his students. In the classroom he is not pooh-poohing rivals; he has no reason to believe that in

an undergraduate program he is teaching future colleagues, inheritors of his unfulfilled renown. His responsibility as a pedagogue, as a leader of youth, is to liberate--not entrap--minds. And he cannot afford the vanity of believing that his eloquence, so painstakingly arrived at, is automatic in students, or "instamatic." Or negligible.

And last, simplicity. Art's most prized quality. Life's most overwhelming lesson. The intricacies of books and ideas can be programmatically discussed, and should be--profitably. But the simplicity of wise understanding and of enduring patience is no simple-minded exercise: it is too wholly human. Simplicity can nd be programmed; it cannot be taught. But it will be learned and known and felt, and it will prevail.

I have not mentioned writing, or composition, in an English program borne of the wisdom of human experiment with books. Allow me a short footnote. "Writing" implies reading and thinking, and there is nó more reliable measure of a man's understanding and willingness to test and share his mind than his attempts to turn insight and judgment into written words. Any experiment with English that programmatically denies such attempts, or that minimizes the importance of written work, denies also, it seems to me, the rights of a student to--and the responsibilities of a student for--his feelings. If a student is programmed into believing that he is what he is, that he feels the way he

feels, and that that's the way it is and there's nothing more to be said or done about it except, perhaps, to be: to talk, to "gas," to "dig," to "do ('ya know') his own thing": is he not living in a void of cloistered virtue, of self-styled innocence and the un-self-examined life? Not asked to write, not asked to think outside himself and to define his feelings, is he likely to experience anything? Or will life for him be all thoughtless sensations and general impressions? And, since men grow older and count more and more on the mind, will he sit like some mock Buddha--not an enlightened man but a miniature plaster model that was poured into a mould and that "set," exchanging heat for permanent rigidity? And will he have learned how to feel nothing, nothing in particular, towards anyone or anything: perhaps how not to care at all?